**Au Natur**

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# Au Natur

by The_Valley_of_The_Dorks

Summary

Will Graham is not cut out for a life of leisure.

Notes

A/N: I had a very bad year lol, so bad I'm writing my first fanfic in nearly ten years so u know it's been a disaster. And since 100% of my coping mechanisms are morally gray homosexuals doing shenanigans I figured you and I, dear reader, could just trauma bond for like ten minutes or however long it takes you. Good luck. Also, I wrote this without the internet so forgive me for any geographic or naming weirdness.

Also also, no anti-Jack comments. They make me sad.

See the end of the work for more notes

The weather was changing, and the ocean— icy cold and too huge to bear, dragged Will beneath itself, filled his stomach and lungs until he sank.

And then awoke from darkness. Just like that, suddenly breathing.

Sea salt air and, in his periphery shadows seemed to shift and change— exhale open, welcome him.

It was no longer cold.

Hannibal said: 'Welcome back, Will.'

And Will washed over with relief and agony swirling together, drowning him anew.

–

Parisian summer blooms in fields of delicate, sweet smelling flowers, blown open by an adoring yellow sun.

Will hums, staring out at the park and its endless waves of sunlit people. Dogs on leashes. Babies in strollers. Jean shorts.

The air behind him changes, but he doesn't have to look up to know why. A richness of cloves and cedar, of fresh garlic and soft vanilla pods clutches at his entire being.

'Almost done?' Hannibal asks.

Will can only smile.

–

Years and years ago Will Graham struggled with something they used to call an empathy disorder (extrasocial personality disorder if you look it up today).

Now, though, his personality is his own. His thoughts. His dreams.

Mostly.

Just the slimmest shards of Hannibal intrude. Manageable chunks.

—

Dinner that night is roasted restauranteur with a side of young elk marinated in honey and a pomegranate jus. The wine is red and supple and perfect.

—

Ballet bores Will to tears, but for Hannibal's sake he indulges. It's the performance of attendance— dressing up, seeing and being seen. Hannibal wears the center of attention like any crisp suit, fitted perfectly to his form.

Will itches. Pouts.

His focus wavers from the performance on stage, catching on the eye of a woman in the opposite balcony. Forty-something. Beautiful. Tall and thin with an understated taste in both fashion and companion. She smiles. He smiles.

In the lobby, Will dutifully looks pretty while Hannibal holds court, all eyes fixed on the mysterious Danish count with his out of the way accent.

Whatever French isn't fixed to Louisiana Creole is beyond Will's ability, so he doesn't bother. And anyway the inane chatter of the idle rich crosses oceans, indistinguishable from shore to shore.

That is until the crowd parts for her. Sylvie, he finds out later. Sixth generation heiress to a blood soaked Hatian sugar fortune, she glides effortlessly into view. No longer obscured by the balcony's gilded walls, her dress falls around her like gentle honey. Will doesn't have to know fashion to know that a yard of that fabric alone probably costs more than the house in Wolf Trap.

'Count Fjalbrök,' she presents her hand and Hannibal bends to kiss its delicate white gloved fingers.

Will watches her eyes sparkle, a demure crease on the edges of her lips the only evidence of emotion. Hannibal's expression mirrors her vagueness perfectly.

Will's stomach sours.

Hannibal's eyes stray to meet Will's and it's immediately obvious Hannibal isn't just loving this; he's dining on it.

She laughs. 'Did I pronounce that right?'

'Perfectly,' Hannibal grins.

'And your partner,' her smile falters. 'L'Americain?'

'Will,' Hannibal supplies.

'You simply must join my companion and I for dinner,' she insists, blue eyes glinting beneath the glowing light of a huge crystal chandelier.

Hannibal's gaze meets Will's.

It's his choice, the look seems to say. But Hannibal knows exactly what he's doing.

Will shrugs. 'Sure.'

Sylvie claps her gloved hands together. 'Perfect,' she announces.

The scene ends there, performers drifting off back into the corners of their easy, privileged lives.

Later, Hannibal and Will walk hand in hand down Rue Pierremont. Across the street and around the corner a famous restaurateur, Gargin, met a terrible end— teeth fashioned into a crown, arms missing, roses where his eyeballs should have been. Grizzly stuff.

Luckily, Will is nothing if not perfectly vigilant.

—

Their shared apartment is too big.

Each decadent red wall seems to pull away from him. Every room seems to echo. To mock. He'll drive himself crazy filling them in his mind, trying to drag them in until he no longer hangs entirely unmoored.

It's breakfast the next morning — a six cheese omelet brimming with chives, sun-dried tomatoes and burning jalapenos that Will doesn't wait to finish.

Around a mouthful it bursts out of him: 'I want a dog.'

Hannibal is surprised. As surprised as he can ever be anyway. 'Alright, dear Will.' he dabs at the corner of his clean lips. 'Just one.'

Will frowns. Reams and reams have been written about the art of negotiation— never starting from a weakened position, for one. Never negotiating while hungry, for two.
He scowls into his orange juice.

But Hannibal likes that too. There's no winning.

—

Will spends that Saturday observing coverage of CCTV cameras outside pharmacies throughout the east side of the city. He finds two suitable candidates in an inner city storefront with smashed cameras and another in a quiet neighborhood that must have had theirs installed in the 90s, then made sure to ignore upkeep. It's a toss up.

At home, Hannibal fusses. First, stuffing Will into an ocean-deep-blue suit. Then a feral-green number with a black shirt and tie. He looks at Will like an unfinished artwork mere brush strokes from perfection.

It's funny and it's not. The green wins in the end.

Will is momentarily surprised to find that Hannibal has foregone anything complementary or vaguely matching today, only to watch him slip a silk handkerchief the same dark hue as Will's suit into the breast pocket of his black dinner jacket.

For Hannibal it shows impressive restraint, but the metaphor bears remarking upon.

'Your heart,' Will grins. 'Subtle.'

Hannibal's eyes soften on Will, fingers brushing the curls out of his eyes.

'For you, Persephone,' his breath feather light against the soft edge of Will's jaw. 'Where my blood flowers warm with spring.'

A strange far away thought reminds Will, not unkindly, that at least Persephone did not become Queen of the underworld willingly.

–

The dinner party is a chore— the usual kind where the hosts are either too much or not enough. In Sylvie and Jean-Baptiste, Will and Hannibal are gifted both.

The food is swanned in by waiters in white suits. Six unremarkable courses, Will finds. After so long indulging in Hannibal's excesses, even the finest seems to pale. But maybe it's the difference between a plate of delicately plated foie gras floating above a green wine emulsion served by a stranger and leg of maitre dis— hunted, bled and skinned, just for you.

Maybe he's spoiled.

Sylvie, for her part, clings to Hannibal like a flotsam on the edge of any tremendous ship. Will isn't imagining the desperate edge to her endless soliloquies.

After all it was with motive that she arranged the four of them thus: Hannibal at the head, his high back chair overlooking the endless grand table, Sylvie to his left, crowded up against him as to be falling off his cushion, Jean-Baptiste to Hannibal's right dispassionately picking at his miniscule portion. And then Will deposited beside Jean-Baptiste.

Even here, in this place of little dignity, Will has to admit, his vantage point has its upshots. His eyes unburdened by the demand of contact, he is free to let them wander. He can tell for instance that for all their polish and sophistication the couple is facing a tight financial season. Tight for the ultra-wealthy, anyway. Sylvies outfit is a repeat from last year's fashion week, her heels out of season Louis Vuittons. That is if the gossip rags are to be believed.

And the rest of it. The dinner party. The ballet. Sylvie and Jean-Baptiste are hunters too.

But Hannibal is nobody's prey.

–

They take the scenic route home, pausing for a long moment at the river, pressed against a chain link fence of padlocked lovers' hearts.

For all that Hannibal displays himself as endlessly calculating a shatter of a moment often presents itself whenever Will catches him just there, on the razor's edge of pin-prick hot desire, when the man's impulse control disappears like so many grains of sugar on any outstretched tongue.

'How do you like our new friends?' Hannibal asks the air.

Will knows him well enough to roll his eyes and fix his gaze instead on the shimmering inky black swelling below. 'I like them just fine.'

And Hannibal, like a vampire poised to drink from the neck of a particularly sexless virgin, lurks behind Will's ear, warming his skin with the heat of his breath. 'And Sylvie, our dear hostess?'

Will leans back into the supple fabric of Hannibal's suit. 'I can't wait to get to know her.'

Hannibal fills his lungs. 'Good,' he answers.

–

There are rumors of a serial killer in the balmy Paris air, slipping through door frames and stealing across open window sills.

A serial killer, they say, who strings up his victims and steals their viscera.

The Parisian police holds a dour press conference: 'The victim, Gregor Gargin was a 35 year old restaurant owner with several—'

–

Will Graham's extrasocial personality disorder no longer constitutes an undue burden on his ability to live a comfortable and fulfilling life. It is therefore no longer diagnosable as a disorder. Infinitely useful, now that his ability lies under his control. At least that's what Hannibal thinks.

It doesn't really feel that way in the costume wing of the Musee de l'art Francophone— watching socialites and celebutantes alike swan about in outfits at price points closer to a down payment on the average family home than anything currently protecting Will's modesty. He can't inhabit these people even if he wants to —mostly because they're not inhabiting themselves either— but also because the sheer stimulation of the place reminds him that there was a secondary diagnosis in there he never looked into but really should have.

He keeps his head down, plastered to the little pamphlet trumpeting the museum's raw scrubbed version of Coco Chanel's life and times.

At that he has to smile. Behind everything lies rivers of guts and gore. Even the lovely things like poofy dresses in their pretty, swirling patterns.

Lovely things that Hannibal, at least, would appreciate, but alas, Will has come alone. The dresses say nothing to him, except that they are being held up by cold plastic molded in the vague, unthreatening shape of human women. It reflects strangely on the ambient psychopathy of fashion as an industry, and reminds him of other killers who simultaneously covet and abhor female bodies.

Of course, he isn't here for the dresses. He's here to cast a lure.

Sylvie nearly brushes past him and he doesn't try to stop her. It's a delicate game. The fish will come, but only if you let them.

She stops short, then turns.

'Will!' she announces.

'Oh,' Will looks up, fixes his glasses. 'Sylvie?'

She's wearing a bright blue Yves Saint Laurent the online gossips swear must be a rental. The diamonds glinting across her neck and wrists are apparently just as ephemeral, returning to Du Sauram by midnight.

He smiles wider as she glides closer. 'Uh,' he eyes her up and down. 'You look great!'

'Thank you darling,' she glances around him and then smiles even wider. 'It's Saint Laurent, couture last fall.'

Two falls ago, actually. But lies don't have to be sensical if the structural integrity of your identity relies on them being true.

Will nods. 'Well, it really suits you, I think. I don't really have a head for all this stuff.'

'Wow! But you always look so good!'

'Oh,' he tries at bashful. 'That's all Oskar. He's a genius, pretty much.'

'I very much agree, yes,' her smile droops into an affectation of a frown. 'But why is he not here? Does he not appreciate the genius of Chanel?'

'Oh, I don't know,' Will shrugs. 'They sent him tickets but he's busy so he gave me both. I had a free afternoon so…'

A moment, then, suspended in time, bending around the contours of Sylvie's mouth as it curves into the minor gravity of Will's lie. And then her eyes change, focus directed entirely on Will. He is the center of her universe.

A shiny little lure, deadly as it is tempting.

Will could be doing anything else but he's here, at an event Sylvie begged, borrowed and stole to attend every year for the past ten years. Will doesn't realize the value of his influence over a rich and powerful man. Will is totally guileless.

Why waste your energy on sharks when the guppies are this easy?

'Will!' she exclaims, slapping him lightly on the chest. 'Regarde, allow me to teach you.'

The line tenses.

–

Hannibal does get him a dog.

It's a big furry monster of a mutt, mixed between shepherd and a long hair, with big sharp jaws and weapons grade doe eyes Today Will decides are Future Will's problem.

'Where did you get him?' Will scratches the very good boy along the back of his neck. He almost expects to hear that Hannibal killed the owner.

But no: 'There's an animal shelter a few doors from the boulangerie I frequent on Wednesdays— by the river.'

'Oh. Uh—'

'I thought you would have noticed it by now, given your proclivities.'

'Well,' Will pulls his face away from a barrage of slobbering doggy kisses. 'I can't read French.'

Hannibal leans down beside him, his presence proclaimed by the rich cologne that suddenly dominates Will's breathing. 'You humble yourself too much, Will. Your French may lie dormant, but it is not dead. I recommend exercising the muscle now and again, n'est pas, le favorisé.'

Will turns to him, meets his eye. 'The favourite?'

Hannibal shakes his head, then gazes at Will with a singular intensity. 'The favoured.'

And then the cold press of lips to his forehead.

Will sinks. Drowns.

—

That night, Will presses his cheek against Hannibal's chest, to the pace of his heart still racing with exertion.

He says: 'If you hurt my dog I'll leave you.'

Hannibal's reply is easy, unguarded. 'If you try to leave me, I'll kill you both.'

And that's how Will knows he's already won. 'And then you'll be alone.'

Silence flowers between them— thin and deadly. Absurdly beautiful.

–

Will is content to spend most of his new life of leisure at home with Sunshine. They train. They play. They nap.

It's approximate to something so old and terribly familiar that Will sometimes forgets himself and calls out for Winston instead. Sometimes he finds tears in his eyes.

—

Sylvie comes around for coffee.

Will thumbs at the razor blade edge of his fishing line.

–

A butcher is found with her tongue missing, hair a big golden whorl about her face, stigmatas on her palms and feet, and dressed, some say, like an angel.

'Holier than thou,' Will comments behind a newspaper he can barely read. The image scratches at his brain. A reminder, but of what?

Hannibal's voice is light and carefree. 'Strange attitude from one who deals in the flesh of the dead.'

Whatever he's frying suddenly bursts with steam, filling the huge kitchen with the spice of chestnuts and hot oil.

—

The Parisian police announces a partnership with the FBI.

—

The apartment is liminal, occupied between the real spaces of their lives: the murders. Something in their living here feels strictly temporary. Or breakable like a glass jar edging off a table.

It will shatter, and Will spends the intervening months bracing himself.

—

Sylvie bobs about at the face of Will's lure, watching it's long feathery tendrils wave gently in the placid water.

She opens her mouth.

'You understand, of course, parce que je suis tres, how you say, interested, I think? In expanding operations, oui? But funding is tight mon cher.'

She takes a bite of cinnamon croissant so delicately no crumbs fall.

Will leans over the kitchen island, sighs. 'The economy sounds kinda shitty lately. I get it.'

'Oui, precisely. And it was my father's business. He loved it so. I would hate to see it crumble because of forces beyond our control.'

'Totally, yeah.'

'So,' her smile widens and her eyes soften. 'I was wondering if I could ask a favour? Trop petite, nothing very serious.'

'Shoot.'

'Will you please speak with your partner, on my behalf. We discussed some of this at dinner but went nowhere I'm afraid. Let him know we're still open to taking him on as an investor.'

'Uh,' Will scratches at the back of his head, oblivious. 'Sure, how much are you thinking?'

'Only three or four million. Probably 3.7, not too much, vraiment?'

'Sure,' Will smiles. He allows her a moment to grasp at the tendrils of triumph. But only a moment. Then: 'Oh no. Wait.'

Her frown, as sudden as it is unforced.

Will returns it. 'Sorry, it's nothing serious, but he needs a letter in your handwriting. He does it with everyone, I think. To protect his investment. Just some assurances that you're not running a Ponzi scheme or something, with your signature. You know how he is.'

'Oh!' Her relief is almost thick enough to choke. 'I see. Yes, mais oui. Au demain prochaine! I'll send a courier. Thank you so much Will.'

Will smiles, demuring. He glances at her through his lashes. 'Don't worry about it.'

Her blood speckles the water.

–

Sylvie's boyfriend, Antonio Doros has made his home on the outer edges of a forgotten Parisian neighborhood besieged by poverty and frequent police activity. He's 35, underemployed and a refugee of the Portuguese economic crisis. His slumlord, a deeply unpleasant third generation heir with a sprawling villa near Nice, doesn't bother much with upkeep, let alone maintaining the integrity of his building's internal security systems.

In other words, the password is password.

Antonio works Monday to Saturday at odd hours. Every Sunday and Friday entail a rendezvous Sylvie at a palatial hotel in the middle of the city. They text frequently— inanely.

–

Will leans into the magnifying glass— eyes darting across the loops of Sylvie's ostentatious signature, seeking abberations against his own recreation. Some tremulous width of accusation in the premature slant of the Y— the hesitant loop of an insecure E. But no.

He sits back— throat tight in the face of his master-work. The genius for which his Narcissus thirsts, enamoured by the reflective thread of Will's ability. The white legal pad itself an artifact of obsession: Sylvie Sylvie Sylvie. It is a death rattle.

Hannibal leans into the space beside Will. 'Your breadth of talent never ceases to amaze me.' He kisses Will's cheek.

'Thanks,' Will smells the aftershave and turns to see Hannibal in his usual public facing regalia— tweed jacket and all. 'Going out?'

Hannibal sighs. 'Yes, sadly. My colleagues from the institute demand I make an appearance. Mythology in the 21st Century. Would you like to join me?'

'No,' Will returns to his signatures. 'We'd take hours to leave.'

'You understimate me, Will. The process of dressing you begins days in advance.'

'I'm not going to dispute that.'

'Nor should you,' Another kiss to the top of Will's head. 'I love you, mon couer.'

'I love you too, Hannibal. Be careful out there,' Will can't stop himself grinning into the magnifying glass. 'There's a killer roaming the streets of Paris.'

'I'll be home in one piece, cher.' Will can hear the smile in his voice. 'You shouldn't worry so much.'

–

Jean-Baptiste swears he loses his phone at some outdoor cafe or other— only to rediscover it resting, untouched, inside his desk at the city office.

–

Hannibal's fingers run along the silk thread curl of Will's hair. Then stop, pulling, but only a little. Only enough to give Will pause.

He looks up and meets Hannibal's eyes— empty in that way of theirs. Will's heart stumbles over itself. Races, panicked like a jack rabbit with ears to the underbrush.

Hannibal is still a killer. Above all things, a predator.

His fingers tighten in Will's hair, enough to sting, enough to draw a tight breath from the depths of Will's constricting lungs.

But before Will can do anything at all, Hannibal lets him go just as quickly. Will's scalp throbs, pain receptors flooding with stinging relief.

The light in Hannibal's eyes returns, he smiles genially as if they were in the middle of any conversation. 'How Hades must have felt upon winning his prize.'

Will shuts his eyes, breath normalising. He smiles, the absurdity of Hannibal's allegory finally unfolding. 'You didn't abduct me.'

'I did,' Hannibal smiles, imperious. Above Will. Above everything. 'Poor Demeter.'

Will imagines his long dead father. No gnashing of teeth there, even if the man wasn't six feet under when his first born decided to run away with a cannibal. Will glances up at the huge apartment. If Billy cared at all it'd be on a schedule synchronous with the deadlines of his gambling debts.

Otherwise Hades would be free to do as he pleased.

Hannibal's fingers returns to Will's hair, touch lighter than breathing.

'What would you like for dinner?' he asks.

Will rolls his eyes. 'Pomegranates.'

—

Hannibal completes his sounder with the flower adorned head of a police officer impaled on a pike in front of his own headquarters.

But Will doesn't hear about it until the next day, trying very hard to read the article in a small, overgrown park just outside Antonio Doros' building. He wonders who else has put together the delicate thread tying together each tableau. Who else can tell that each murder is a carefully crafted sentence in a brief but cogent fable? This, Hannibal says, is the price of hubris.

The irony is not lost on Will.

But there is something else there too, something Will is not quite seeing between the white and gold and hemophiliac red.

A delicate chirp from his digital watch returns him to his mission. Three pm. He'll think about the sounder later. Right now he gathers up his newspaper and stands, tucking it under his arm. With the lackadaisical ease of a man with nowhere to be, Will starts in the direction he's been memorizing for weeks now.

This side of Paris, away from the boulevards and promenades— surveilled at every corner of its cracked streets and unlit alleys, beats at his chest with the familiar rythms of shadowed criminality. Here, eyes follow pavements, glancing furtively this way and that. He walked streets like this, once, with a holster at his chest and handcuffs at the ready.

Now though, on the other side of the thin blue line, he can see what he missed in his youth. The degradation of life sketched into the bare margins of society. Violence here isn't just necessary— it's good. It's a final punctuation mark in a sentence that begins in Jean Baptiste's boardroom and ends in the hidden crevices of drug deals and survival sex work.

Criminality is power. The only power. It's how life in the margins indents existence into the universe. In the same way that Sylvie's closets overflow with ruffles and gold, these streets overflow with blood.

He turns down a dark, garbage filled passageway ensconced between two husks of a small, abandoned retail complex. Holding his breath, he crouches behind an overflowing dumpster.

The plastic bag is right there where he left it.

First, the gloves— then the Tripoxine, precisely measured. He slides it back into its plastic case then slips it into a waiting brown paper bag, perfectly crisp, with a local fast food chain logo huge on the front. A hair net follows, then a baseball cap. And finally, a ridiculous pair of prescription Ray Bans that hide most of his face.

He stands, throwing both bag and newspaper in the dumpster.

The path to Antonio's apartment is easy enough, slicing this way and that, evading the persistent intrusion of ever watching cameras. Finally, the delapidated old brutalist eyesore comes into view, adorned with flowering graffiti murals overlapping incoherently over themselves, clamouring to be seen. He buzzes apartment eighteen. A woman's voice scratches through the broken plastic intercom. 'Alain?'

'C'est moi,' Will dips his voice half an octave and waits, heart clamouring at his throat.

A moment, long and painful.

'Vous etes tôt,'

He doesn't speak. Doesn't breathe.

The door clicks open.

He slips past with the practiced ease of any husband, home from work. The floorpan in his head lights his way, leading him to the emergency staircase behind the door next to apartment five. He takes the stairs up two at a time, propelled by the achingly familiar rush of adrenaline and cortisol.

He stops on the fifth level to catch a long breath. There's no hurry, but he prefers not to wait. He takes off his glasses and gloves, stowing them away in his pocket. Then he pushes through the door back into the familliar smell of mold and faint urine.

Apartment 38 is on the left and Will heads straight for it.

He knocks.

Waits.

Knocks again.

Inside, feet pound closer, something metallic scratches along the floor and then, like any man above six foot and unreasonably lucky, Antonio swings the door open, unafraid. It is the only mistake Will needs him to make.

It happens fast. So fast Antonio's expression never gets the opportunity to change— Will's syringe in his neck as his bright curious eyes fade. He stumbles backwards, falling first on his side then seizing lightly and losing consciousness.

Will looms over his huge body, the door closed behind them already.

He slides his gloves back on and retrieves his syringe.

The next part is just as terribly easy. He unlocks Antonio's phone pattern with the L shape he's seen again and again on the building's shitty CCTV footage. In the messages, he finds Sylvie's chain.

He writes: 'Demain 10 matin, salle 156, j'ai une surprendre!!!!!!' he follows it with ten love hearts.

She replies with several starry eyes and two kisses.

–

The trip to Le Piedmont from here is a long one on foot, but he takes the opportunity to enjoy the stars, the neon, the drunks and their careless joy. It feels like a hundred years ago now he found life impossible.

–

Will hears the rush of air above the persistent din of the hotel shower at maximum pressure. Sylvie's entrance is bookended by the door clicking shut.

Will counts the seconds.

Sylvie on the other side, bursts with excitement. The red roses, dozens and dozens of them, will keep her attention long enough.

He walks out with the knife at his side, curls secured beneath the net and baseball cap— but his eyes are clear. Sylvie must see him. Must understand that it is Will's design..

She senses his presence and twirls around, her huge smile hanging for a long, confused moment before it congeals into a miserable frown.

'Will,' she marches towards him. 'What is this?'

He surveys her reddening face, the rage in her eyes.

'A reckoning,' Will answers. His body thrums with potential.

–

Jean Baptiste is still wiping the sleep out of his eyes when Sylvie calls. He fumbles for his glasses to make sure he's not seeing things. It's too early. He's too tired. The whole point of this arrangement was to get her out of his hair— let him sleep in, eat like shit, and watch his telenovelas in peace. He sighs, swiping and pressing the phone to his ear.

'Sylvie, que est—'

'Jean,' she gasps, her voice edged with a brittle sharpness. 'Veuillez venir à l'hôtel Piedmont, Salle 156. C'est une urgence. J'ai besoin de toi. Dites votre nom à la réception. Viens seul.'

The phone beeps, echoing in the hollow, cavong silence. A wave of nausea burns the back of his throat. In their fifteen year marriage, past the tension, the bitterness, the biting cruelty— he's never once heard Sylvie's voice so much as waver.

He dials her number. Unavailable. He tries again. Again. Again.

His eyes fill with hot tears. His fingers shake.

He throws clothes on without rhyme or reason, sprints to the garages. His mind races and fuck— it could be anything. The cops. The Poles. The fucking tax Nazis.

He slams the Mercedes' door shut, sinking into the supple leather interior, clutching at his collar. He can't breathe. He's been so careful— dotting every possible i, crossing each individual t— paid interests with scrupulous precision. New clients have been slow to join, sure, but not so slow that suspicion has been raised. Blackmailers, then? Kidnappers?

No.

He's spiralling. He starts his car, practicing mindful breathing— each inhale a careful calculation.

He has already schemed himself out of a ten million euro hole without his own wife noticing. He's a genius. Whatever this is, he will win.

–

Sylvie can't breathe, can't think. Will's grip is tight in her hair, his minty breath swimming in her lungs.

The blade sharp at her throat presses tight if she swallows.

Of course Jean Baptiste would fuck up like this. Of course he'd place her fucking life in mortal danger, the absolute moron.

Will shifts behind her, his body bending close. 'It's okay,' he speaks into her ear, a tone she imagines might soothe under different circumstances. 'Just stick to the script. I promise I won't hurt you.'

She sniffles.

Unable to nod, she whispers. 'Merci.'

—

Will listens as the door falls open, curiously at ease. His body a river of persistent calm. It's easy.

Sylvie plays her part, calling Jean Baptiste around the corner. In shrill, shattering French, he asks the room unanswerable questions. Then turns the corner— sleep rumpled shirt, sockless shoes, eyes impossibly wide.

'L'Americain?' he blinks.

It's an exquisite moment, the crescendo of many crushing symphonies. If Hannibal was here. If Hannibal could see him.

To Slyvie he is benevolent, bestowing the slim granule of truth he knows she deserves: 'I lied.'

But he does not give her enough seconds to parse his words— knife searing at her throat, slicing flesh open down to brittle bone.

Jean Baptiste suddenly, exquisitely wet under the weight of her bright, burning red.

It's art.

And he sees it, arching beautifully into perfection.

Jean Baptiste's scream ends in a halted, abortive grunt— knife to the hilt between ribs three and four, on the left. He falls to his knees.

Will stands over the fading spark of his life, watches his scared, confused eyes fall shut.

Will places Jean Baptiste's left hand at the knife and rights himself, seeking out hotel stationery.

In Sylvie's careful hand he writes a gentle love letter to Antonio, punctuating her desire with the flowering signature. He leaves it crumpled, splattered in both her blood and her husband's.

After wiping the red off his face and washing it away in the sink he examines his eyes in the mirror, his curls, his ruddy skin. Even though he thinks he can feel the jagged edges of his ribs digging into the flesh of his heart, his face betrays nothing.

He goes home.

—

Hannibal loves in worshipful gasps of keening desire. Loves with blood and bone and sinew — digs into the core of Will's being and drinks selfishly. He's a bottomless singularity and Will is a ray of endless light.

They unspool and unspool around eternity, tangling desperately together.

Hannibal's fingers are raw with violence at the tender edges of Will's throat.

And Will, beloved, disintegrates in ribbons. .

–

Two days later Sylvie is breaking news and Hannibal is there on the couch, placid eyes— bored almost, watching a white haired police chief tell Will's story for him.

A hapless lover. A jealous husband. A dead wife.

A circle so complete that any inquiring gaze turns instinctively away from abberation.

Hannibal, like a cat after a prized catch, radiates the unbothered calm of any predator well fed. Only the tightness of his grip at Will's ankle pokes at the illusion of total disinterest. After a few minutes Will can't feel his foot.

And then, Hannibal's lips part and it is a prayer, a litany— 'Mon cher'

And Will thinks, nursing his own fever : Yours.

–

Sylvie's death turns into a million things, all at once. A tragedy. A farce. A condemnation. Will watches narratives coming alive under their own steam, choking themselves with hysteria.

A conspiracy weaves itself around Antonio, the foreigner, the migrant, the poor slum dweller — the acceptable target.

But that's only the first week.

By the second week Jean Baptiste's boardroom heists splash across the tabloids and it is the dead man who replaces the pretty boy, propelled by whispers of global peadophile rings, state conspiracies and, somehow, Jews.

The story of Sylvie's death is democratised, diced into morsels and thrown to the rabid millions who slink in the misery of the internet. Everyone wants a starring role in the death of a woman they did not know.

But, as with all celebrity gossip, no matter how red soaked, Sylvie eventually bows out of the front pages, fading into a blurry factoid.

Will finds he feels no different in the wake of his dimming peripheral fame. All that matters is that he is once again radiant in his rightful place under the burning spotlight of Hannibal's enduring attention.

—

A serial killer, they say: the Paris Reaper, stalking the streets. Don't go out alone. Hurry home. Report any suspicious activity

—

There is a place in Wolf Trap, in the shade of a million watching trees. A family resides there. Seven tails wag helplessly in the quiet dark.

Virginia.

Pine trees.

Evergreen.

—

He corners Hannibal at the front door, dressed for work and dimly amused by the gentle ambush.

'I want another dog.'

Silence steels itself into place between them, Hannibal's impassive gaze unmoving. A statue of blood and bone.

Back here again.

Will's heart thrums stupidly hard against his chest. He can't get a read on himself, whether he's scared or spoiling for a fight. Or has his brain melted into a muddy stew of both?

Eventually, through the thinnest parting of Hannibal's lips. 'Why?'

'I—'

I want my family, he thinks. Stops.

'Indulge me,' he whispers instead.

The lie is only a sliver, a hair's breadth of film over the truth of his desire.

Hannibal's eyes flit away, over Will's head amd towards some inscrutable distance. It is a long, long moment Will feels in his bones.

But when it breaks: 'Why do you need my permission?'

Will wants it back.

The words hang before him as an accusation.

'Fuck off,' Will breathes, a tightness seizing at his throat, filling his lungs.

'I'll see you later.' A chaste kiss lands against the swell of Will's curls.

–

It's only with the turning of the front door knob that Will realises he's sitting in the dark.

And when he stands blood swims, heady and overfull. His legs tingle with disuse.

Hannibal enters as a width of dark shapes blanketed by a glow of golden light, the sharp edges of which press up against Will's bare feet.

'Will?' Hannibal says, his voice easy and soft— buttery smooth.

Will opens his mouth to speak but finds nothing to say.

Hannibal is close enough now that he can lean in, peering deep down into Will's eyes. 'Are you losing time, Will?'

'No,' Will's voice scratches through the dryness of his throat. 'No. Just losing track of it, that's all.'

Hannibal's fingers, strong and sure, lift Will's face upward and he searches Will's eyes as if there's anything there to be found. Just as quickly, his attention reverts and his fingers fall away, leaving Will's skin bereft.

They stare at each other, the silence between them expanding into a gulf. A pit.

Will, of course, gives up first. 'What if we just had a fucking conversation?'

Hannibal, suddenly sweeter than sugar, smiles wide. His body unfolds into a conspicuously unguarded looseness of limbs. '"What if," indeed.'

'Are you angry with me, Hannibal?'

'I cannot ever be angry with you, my love.'

Will fills his lungs, pushing away the tightening reams of frustration from around his chest.

'Help me out then, please. What do you want?'

'You, Will.'

Will's heart hammers at the swell of his throat. It isn't fair. 'You have me.'

'Do I?'

Will stares. 'Okay, what's the problem?'

Hannibal doesn't move, doesn't seem to breath. Will is struck then, by the vision of a viper, coiled back to strike.

Hannibal's eyes drift from Will's and land somewhere in the middle distance. 'I wonder how much of our current life you wish to supplant with the former.'

A steady, aching thrum acsends the curve of Will's skull. 'None. I'm here aren't I?'

'Indeed you are.'

'This isn't a conversation.'

'No.' Hannibal's exhales, stands to loom over Will. His cold fingers find the edge of Will's lips. 'I'm reminded of an old wound, one that haunts me still, despite my best efforts.'

Will's gut twinges with the memory of it. He shuts his eyes against the swell of panic in his chest. Nausea climbs up his throat in hot anticipation of that molten blade of searing pain.

Hannibal's breath brushes soft against Will's cheek. 'Jack Crawford is in Paris.'

–

It's not fair.

Will isn't a fucking wind up toy Hannibal can screw up and send in whatever direction, teeth bared, knife in hand.

He hasn't seen Jack in God only knows how long. In his own way he misses him.

Without meaning to, he sinks into fantasies illuminating every road not taken. Roads leading back to a miserable career burdened by a life of lonely, ever encroaching insanity.

At some point he has to admit that everything changed that morning in Jack's office. He was a rabbit. And some rabbits want to be devoured.

–

So he buries himself in the apartment, struggling against Hannibal's immovable will like poor Sisyphus.

Now that the thrill of the hunt has since been surmounted, old hurts can surface like dead bodies full of noxious gas breaching an eeriely placie lake. It's stupid, but it makes sense in its own way. It makes Will wish he held grudges like that too.

He asks one morning, on the eve of a chilling early autumn: 'Is it because you're bored?'

Hannibal doesn't skip a beat. 'I keep well occupied, my dear Will.'

'Why can't I believe it's just hurt feelings?'

Sunshine rests his big, soft head on Will's lap, sighing. Will runs his fingers through the long fur of his ears.

Hannibal shrugs, turning away from a cottillions custard mixture. He raises a silver spoon to Will's lips.

Will sighs around blooming vanilla, shades of barely there mango.

'What do you want me to say? It's perfect.'

Hannibal smiles demurely. 'We've been working on your pallet for over a year now, I need more than that.'

Will rolls his eyes. 'Maybe cut back on the sharpness of the mango.'

Hannibal raises an eyebrow. 'More sugar, Will?'

'I didn't have a sweet tooth before you.'

The smugness in Hannibal's answering grin is impossible to ignore. It would be so easy to fall into the black hole at its edges, lined as it is with the bare, pulsing drum of the same obsessive possession that has charecterised their entire tragedy.

But Will is stronger than that now, even if only a little. 'There are easier ways to leave Paris.'

'I'm sure there are,' Hannibal says, close enough now that Will can taste the peppermint in his breath.

—

It is inky black, darker than misery. Will, eluded by sleep, stares at nothing.

The stag rears its huge, black head, presses itself into view.

Will's heart clutches. But Hannibal is here, pressed to his back and breathing warm, balmy air against his neck.

The stag watches. Will watches back.

–

He is reminded of that ocean's edge, of icy water and shards of unforgiving rock. He is reminded of his own lungs burning, heaving like liquid in his chest. It wasn't so long ago now, but it does feel like another lifetime. Like it happened to someone else.

The water was a force of nature, disinterested in the fragile whims of any creature caught in its current.

–

Winter meets them in the middle of their stalemate, snowfall adorning the frozen borders this strange, static truce.

Will wonders how long Hannibal's patience can lie fallow, before it needs watering.

'If I kill him,' he whispers into the cashmere of Hannibal's ocean blue sweater. 'Then we have to leave Paris.'

'I know, mon Cher,' Hannibal tells the pages of the acient poetry book between his fingers. It looks like Cyrillic, but Will is hardly an expert.

'No, Hannibal.' Will breathes, watching the snowfall outside turn rooftops white. 'I don't mean Florence next, or Moscow or wherever. I mean a cabin in the woods, forest everywhere.

No cell service.'

Hannibal is still. Frozen like the Sienne just outside.

Will pushes Hannibal's silver hair out of his eyes. 'I know you don't like that, sharing me with my past. Or at all. But you found me on the precipice of building a real life. That's where I want you, Hannibal. I don't want the past and you separate and conflicting. I want you merged. Together. I can't survive otherwise.'

Will stares at the side of Hannibal's head as he braces for a polite, slicing rebuke. He traces the shell of his ear, the whispering of gray sideburn fluff groomed fastidiously close to the hairline.

Hannibal inhales finally. 'I have personally found great peace in foreclosing entirely on my past.'

Will grins. 'No offence, sweetheart, but you eat people.'

Hannibal chuckles so suddenly that Will startles. Then he wraps an arm around Will's neck. 'Fair. I will find us a compromise.'

It is not lost on Will that in this case compromise means satisfying Hannibal's whims first and foremost, before acquiescing to a circumstance satisfactory primarily to him.

–

It is two weeks later, under the long shadowy awning of Hannibal's compromise that Will takes the steps down the Deuxieme Romaine metro station two at a time.

The station, halfway between the Piedmont and the apartment is appropriately busy and Will, resigned to his fate, doesn't bother with the excesses of subterfuge. His hair has grown longer and that's about it.

He sees Jack first, hunched over on a little wooden bench, eyes fixated on the platform. His uniform remains unchanged, but the shape filling it out has lost some of its width and much of it's imposing authority. If there are agents lying in wait, their camouflage is too thorough for Will to parse.

So he smiles, hands in pockets. Jack is, after all, an old friend.

If Jack is startled when Will takes the seat beside him, he hides it well.

'I can't tell you how happy I was to hear your voice,' Jack scratches out, his voice rough with disuse, or overuse, more likely.

'I could say the same, ' Will smiles at the empty platform.

'I—,' Jack shakes his head. 'I thought you were dead. No. That's not true. I hoped you were dead.'

'Sorry to disappoint.'

'No Will, I'm not disappointed. I mean it. I'm glad you're alive anyway. How did you survive?'

'You'd have to ask the man himself.'

Jack faces Will then and finally, Will sees the accumulated age around his eyes, the compound interest loss demands of living skin. But still, the twinkle remains. A gentle assurance that inspite of it all Jack will still fight. 'Would an audience with him be out of the question?'

'You'd make his day.'

Jack stands first and to Will, he grins. 'Lead the way?

–

It hasn't snowed in weeks, but today the sky is torn open. Will shivers, perennially underdressed.

'This feels familiar,' Jack's breath is a puff of white, hovering in front of his face.

'Like no time has passed.'

'Will?'

'Jack.'

'Would you go back to Baltimore with me, if I asked?'

'A few weeks ago, maybe. Not now.'

Jack laughs, almost to himself. 'Bad luck. What changed?'

Will stops. Jack stops, turning so they face each other. For a moment they are just two stationary objects in a sea of pedestrian traffic. Strangers, almost, watching each other watch each other.

Will's lungs fill with snowy air. 'I don't need it anymore.'

'Not even the lake?'

'Not even the lake.'

'I'd be lying if I said I understood the allure.'

Will nods, stepping closer. It's better that Jack hears him clearly. 'I'm not sure I do either. But it's too late for any regrets, Jack. I promised. And he compromised. He never compromises.'

Jack blinks. Hard. His eyes are wet.

'He's going to kill you, Will.'

At that Will has to laugh. Has to, because the alternative would be to scream. He didn't follow a cannibal across the world under the delusion that he'd be dying at ninety surrounded by grandkids.

'I know,' he grins, stepping past Jack, and bumping him on the shoulder. 'Come on. Dinner's getting cold.'

Jack's stony expression doesn't change, but they fall in lockstep again.

–

Will didn't bother to ask who the penthouse belonged to, but now they're here, he's teeming with questions. Someone lives here, certainly. Or did until very recently. Every available surface boils over with disparate miscellany— maps, woven baskets, ceremonial masks. Even the floor is just a collection of rugs in various states of distress and cleanliness, overlapping and stacked seemingly at random. But it's the walls— covered with everything from movie posters and ancient maps with their misshapen continents to radom postits and cereal box covers along the way. It's unsettling, speaking as it does to the kind of compulsion that ruins lives.

Not the sort of place he can imagine Hannibal walking into willingly. But then, maybe that is the point.

Whomever Jack has enlisted to back him will need to watch their step.

Jack nudges his arm and they share a moment of eye contact. Will shrugs.

And then, as if on cue, Hannibal: 'Gentlemen, you're late.'

He sounds so genial it's farcical. Will's laughter remains low in his throat as Jack steps ahead, all six feet of him suddenly dominating the huge foyer. There's no intimidating Hannibal, but Will doubts anything Jack does tonight will be for anyone's benefit but his own.

They follow Hannibal's voice to a dining room almost as cluttered, with the exception of a long, precisely set dining table. The mahogany wood shines bare beneath three white plates, bordered by sparkling silver cutlery. A wine bottle has already been decanted into three glasses. Surrounding each plate lies two forks. One spoon. And a butter knife.

Hannibal stands behind the head of the table, in his hands a serving platter with a huge, steaming bird at it's center. Person suit firmly in place, this could be any talented chef hosting any small dinner party. He lowers the platter to the center of the table as his eyes flit up, holding Will and Jack in place. A slow spreading smile parts his lips and he says: 'Please. Sit.'

They do. Will takes his seat to the left and Jack his opposite.

With a practised flourish, Hannibal slices into the meat with ease and parcels out three slices to Will, then Jack, then himself. Then he lays the knife down in the dead valley between Jack

and Will. It's too far to reach without drawing attention. Like a gun going off, to touch it would be to break the spell.

The air is electric with anticipation. Will's fingers tighten around the delicate stem of his glass as he takes a long sip of bold, heady wine. Jack is consumed by Hannibal though, transfixed by his eyes. And Hannibal of course couldn't be more radiant, ignoring his own food and focusing, instead, on taking in the spicy, rosemary and wine scent of his creation.

He smiles at Jack. 'I must admit, Jack, turkey is far from my favourite bird, but I thought it only fair to greet you with a taste from home. After all it's almost Christmas.'

It doesn't look like Jack will respond, glancing between Hannibal and the turkey without much expression. But then he shakes his head. 'You'll forgive me, but my appetite isn't up to the task.'

Hannibal takes a long, indulgent sip of wine. 'No offence taken, circumstance being what it is.'

That's when Hannibal smiles at Will, every bit the gloating predator. The winner. And Jack glances at Will too, in that moment. His eyes heavy with regret. Grief. Guilt. And a plea, somewhere in there, for forgiveness.

Will drinks more wine.

Hannibals bares his teeth in less a smile than a promise. 'Tell me Jack. What have you been up to, since we parted ways?'

Jack breathes in through his teeth. Shaking. 'The tableaus, you wanted me here. Why?'

Will stops listening. This isn't about him, really. He is a mouse between cats. No, a daughter between mother and rapist. But it's already too late. The seeds have been long digested.

Will finishes his wine flush with heat. Ready now. Whether spring returns is God's own choice.

Hannibal laughs at something and sits back in his seat. 'I assure you, Jack, my capacity for cruelty is indeed bottomless. As you've come to find out. As Will shall come to find out.'

Jack is breathless, incandescent with rage, he reaches into his trenchcoat—

And Will leaps— the table, the knife. In hand, Will flies, certain now. A gunshot. A breaking window. Will collides with Jack— knife to throat, slicing in. Carotid, Will thinks nonsensically. Another gunshot and fuck— heat— burning white across his abdomen. Is that his voice, screaming? Is it Jack? Is it Hannibal? There are more people now. And gunshots. Again. Again. Again. He can't see.

He can't breathe.

—

Pine. Evergreen. And wood suffused with years of rain water. Rubbing alcohol.

But it's the taste in his mouth— dry and inflexible, sharply bitter. Sour. Medication. Fuck.

His eyes struggle open and find the world a mottled brown blur. He makes himself open his mouth. Breathe.

A sudden wetness at his fingertips confounds, at first, until a sharpening yellow form begins to take shape.

'Sunshine?' he scratches out.

He tries to sit up, but every inch of his body screams in protest. Burns like hot coals just under his skin.

'Relax,' Hannibal's voice, the smell of him.

Will blinks the world into sense until, finally, it is a cabin, entirely unfurnished and, from his stationery perspective, not very big. He is on a gurney with an IV in one wrist, rushing liquid into his veins. Blankets lie just under his chest. Sunshine licks his fingers.

Hannibal slides into view, his face so close Will can feel the stubble on his cheek. He has aged, hair a little longer, a little unkempt, but the life in his eyes remains bright. He busies himself with Will's IV.

'Where are we?' Will croaks.

'Compromise,' Hannibal says simply, his breath brushing the underside of Will's cheek. 'Will you stay awake this time?'

Will shuts his eyes, nausea pressing tight at his throat. Tears threaten, stinging. 'Jack?'

Hannibal's answering grin could light up any room. 'Jack died in the hospital, after two weeks comatose.'

'Oh,' is all Will has. His heart. His lungs. Everything.

'And you,' Hannibal presses on. 'Were in a coma for five months. Six gunshot wounds. Lucky for you, a foremost surgeon in his field made you a top priority.'

Will nods. Alive.

Hannibal shakes his head. 'I hope you're ready for some intense physical therapy because that'll be all you're focusing on for the next few months. That and regaining your fine motor skills, your spine has seen better days. But you should be back to your old self by next year.'

'Hannibal, tell me what happened.'

'Not much to tell. You struck the first blow, well placed too, nearly beheading our old friend. But course, he quickly overpowered you, even in that state. His friends were stationed

outside and came in shooting as soon as they heard the commotion. It's true what they say about the French police. Imagine bringing pistols to a gun fight. Anyway I took two insubstantial wounds and dispatched enough of them to flee to the rooftop with you, where we subsequently made our getaway.'

Will shuts his eyes, exhausted just to hear it.

Hannibal steps closer again, Will can feel it. He opens his eyes in time to see Hannibal apperate a chair. He sits just as rigidly as if they were in a multi-million dollar psychiatry office.

'Will,' he says. 'May I make an observation?'

'How would I stop you?'

'Hannibal, I just got out of a coma. Is this the right time for therapy?'

'Categorically.' Hannibal leans back in his chair. 'You're lucid. And trust me, four months is a long time to sit with one's thoughts. The dog being a lackluster conversation partner. May I continue?'

Will breathes in, grounding himself in the sensation of Sunshine's wet tongue against his fingers. 'Go on.'

Hannibal smiles indulgently. 'It occurs to me that, prior to me, Jack was the only man in your life. Taking the place of, if I may be so bold, the father you always longed for but never received. And because of your early childhood trauma, you were ill equipped to protect yourself against the excesses of Jack's demands on your well-being. Believing that being cared for meant suffering. Expecting just as little from your father figure as you learned to expect from your father. The truth is you could have, at any point, recused yourself from the investigations, limited the scope of your role, hell, left town and never come back.'

Will's heart thrums in his chest. Fuck. It hurts. 'Learned helplessness.'

'Precisely,' Hannibal pauses, peering into Will's eyes with a singular intensity. 'Do you see Will, how easy Jack made it for me to manipulate you? To take advantage of the groundwork he laid?'

'Is that why you made me kill him? To pay him back for BSU?'

Hannibal shakes his head. 'No, if he'd had the presence of mind to give you respite, you might have gained the awareness to leave. It would have made my job much harder.'

Hannibal slides in closer, taking Will's cheek in his palm. 'I made you kill him because I wasn't the only one betrayed that night. He dangled you before me, then neglected to protect you from the consequences. That pound of flesh was yours Will, no matter how reluctantly you chose to take it.'

Will's throat is dry, closed up. 'Yes, Hannibal.'

'I'm telling this because I want you to understand how our relationship is to proceed from here.'

Hannibal crosses his legs, allowing a smile that bares his straight white teeth. 'It is clear to me that while you have made great strides in your growth since Baltimore, your recovery is far from complete. Of course I intend to love you, with everything I have. I intend to protect you and nurture your growing talent, but I will not tolerate straying from the path I have built for you. And I certainly will not tolerate any attempt to leave me. Ever. Consider this the final compromise you are likely to extract from me. Am I clear?'

'Crystal,' Will mumbles, feeling for the soft hair on top of Sunshine's head. Petting. Scratching. His chest feels strange. Blooming with a warmth just as comforting as it is choking.

'Excellent,' Hannibal leans in, pressing his lips to Will's hairline. 'Let me get you some water. You must be parched.'

Will doesn't say anything as Hannibal disappears behind him.

He shuts his eyes.

Pine. Evergreen. And wood suffused with years of rain water.

It's like home.

But not quite.

End Notes

Translations:

French: Veuillez venir à l'hôtel Piedmont, Salle 156. C'est une urgence. J'ai besoin de toi. Dites votre nom à la réception. Viens seul

English: Please come to the hotel Piedmont, Salle 156. It's an emergency.I need you.Say your name at the front desk.Come alone.

French: 'Demain 10 matin, salle 156, j'ai une surprendre!!!!!!

English: Tomorrow, 10 in the morning, room 156, I have a surprise!!!!!!

Also thanks for reading! I have two more parts coming up, but please be patient I'm unmedicated lol

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!